

ORCHIDS

It was a common sight in March and April to see the school girls come to school with orchids in their hair; but notwithstanding their abundance and ubiquity, to a North American who has always thought of them as rarities orchids can never be commonplace things. Nor are they, indeed, to the Brazilians, who esteem them highly, as flowers of elegance and distinction.

It is true that orchids grow wild in Pernambuco, as in many other tropical regions. Those growing near cities and towns, and especially those in easily accessible locations, have largely been taken for planting in people's houses; but I have seen from the train window beautiful clusters of orchids growing high on some dead tree, or some inaccessible crag. Although the propagation is generally by rootstocks, the orchids, or some of them at least, do produce seed; and I suppose that in their wild state they are spread by birds, as is the case with so many plants.

Nowadays the name orquídia is coming into favor among the Brazilians, but it is still much more common to hear the name parasita (pronounced pa-ra-zee-ta), which is neither complimentary nor fair to the orchid, since it is not a parasite at all, but an epiphyte, that is, a plant that lives upon another plant, without taking anything from it, maintaining itself with its own green leaves. Its roots lay hold on the bark of the tree on which it grows, or in the case of spongy outer bark or rotten wood, may even penetrate; but it draws no sap from its host, only the moisture that clings to the plant after rain.

One rainy Saturday in July, 1939, a wild looking man came to my door with a large market basket full of orchid plants for sale. He had got them, he said, in the woods, over across the mountain. I hesitated at first, not knowing what to do with them, and dreading a great deal of work in planting them. But the man insisted that it is the simplest thing in the world to plant them; you just place the plant in the crotch of a tree, and tie it in place with a bit of vine, (vines — cipó — are to be found everywhere, and are universally used by the country people for lashing objects together, being much more practical than hemp cord, besides cheaper) and in a few weeks it

would take root, and that would be that. He even offered to plant them for me, and did so. I paid him what he asked, which was five mil reis, or about twenty-five cents, including the labor of planting them. There must have been twenty or thirty plants. Not all of them lived, but most of them did so, and many were still flourishing when I left there in January, 1949. That brings them very near to being the simplest of all plants to grow. It is not even necessary to water them, though in a very dry time a little water may be beneficial.

The orchid gets its living from the light and air, and with only a little water can survive; and it is amazing sometimes to see a little dried up looking plant with barely enough roots to maintain its precarious hold on the bark of a tree suddenly put forth a cluster of glorious **blossoms**. I confess that my orchid growing followed the line of least resistance. I liked to wake up some morning and see an orchid in bloom in the pitomba tree, or peer under the low hanging branches of the mango tree outside the bathroom window, to see if that one had bloomed yet. But orchids do repay some care, as all plants do; and one who will take pains with them can have larger plants, with more and finer blossoms. One simple method that I have seen used is to place the orchid plant in a little basket filled with wood shavings, which can then be suspended in the house, or on a shady porch. When the orchid is found rooted to the dead and decaying branch of a tree the branch may be sawed off in a convenient length, and then suspended like the basket, the decaying wood furnishing a good root hold for the plant for many years. There is a moss-like substance which is sold in the stores in Recife, which is supposed to be about perfect for the roots of orchids; and I daresay real fanciers know a lot more tricks. The culture of orchids is getting to be quite a hobby for some people, and I have heard of some very fine collections of them.

Our familiar orchid was the purple or "orchid" color variety, the flowers being borne in clusters generally of three, though I have seen as many as six. Our plants never had more than three or four clusters each, but a large plant may have fifteen or twenty, or even more. One plant usually blooms out all its flowers within a few days, but there was a good deal of variation in the time of blooming of different plants, apparently just alike; so that our orchids would begin blooming the latter

part of January, and we would have orchids along until up in April, or even May. The season varies with climatic conditions, being quite different on the coast, for instance, than in our dry interior. And of course the season varies somewhat for different varieties of orchids.

Of course there are different varieties. I came to know a few, and those who go deeper into such matters probably know many varieties native to Pernambuco. People were always on the lookout for white ones, and at the time that I bought the basket-full for twenty-five cents people were paying ten dollars or more for a genuine, proved white orchid plant. To my untutored mind the purple ones were much prettier than the white ones; but a rarity is always precious. One of the plants I bought in the basket-full almost turned out to be a white one. The blossom was all white except one purple spot. The plant was not well rooted, and was not thriving in the place where I had it; and rather than risk losing it entirely I gave it to a friend who took more pains with his orchids than I felt that I had time to do. At last reports the plant was still living, but had not bloomed again.

In my childhood I had read stories about people roaming the jungles of Africa in search of orchid bulbs; but our familiar orchids had nothing at all resembling my idea of a bulb — just some thickened stems and masses of roots. Somebody brought me one plant however, that did grow from something resembling a bulb. It had long, graceful leaves, and was entirely unlike the orchids with which I was familiar. I planted it in a eucalyptus tree, where it took root, but never increased much in size. It bloomed each year just about Christmas, a long raceme of small yellow flowers with purple dots. The flowers were not strikingly beautiful, but had in their favor that they stayed in bloom for nearly a month.

There was one orchid that grew in great abundance in the bush covered hills about Garanhuns. Its flower was about the size of a large violet, and a sort of burnt orange in color. The children used to gather them in great masses; but the people did not speak, or think of them as orchids; they were merely "wild flowers".

One member of the orchid family that has attained some international prominence, though not for its flowers, is the vanilla plant, or baunilha, as it is called in

Portuguese. It is found growing wild, but is not, so far as I know, grown commercially to any extent in Pernambuco. Its leaf is characteristically like an orchid. It may, or may not, take root in the earth, but is a sort of vine, going zigzagging cheerfully up the side of a tree trunk, taking root at each joint. I have never seen a plant truly wild, but people have told me that in its wild state it often grows to form a great tangle of vine over the branches of the trees or bushes. I had one plant that one of the workmen found in the woods and brought to me. I tried to care for it, in my haphazard fashion, but always just as it would be getting a good start some accident would befall it. It did bloom once, but bore no fruit.

The fruit is borne in the form of long, fleshy pods, which are dried, and from which is extracted the "vanilla extract" used for flavoring. These dried pods may occasionally be found for sale in the markets in the interior, and may be used for preparing the extract at home, by placing five or six of the pods in a quart bottle, and filling the bottle with alcohol. Absolute alcohol is best, but the common alcohol of commerce does very well (that is, the common alcohol of Brazilian commerce, made from sugar cane -- not rubbing alcohol) and some people use whisky, or even cachaça. This must be allowed to stand for about six months. Of course the quart of extract thus produced will last for a year or more, but the prudent housewife will start preparing some more before this is exhausted. When I went to Brazil in 1935 the manufactured vanilla extract was practically unknown in the interior of Pernambuco, and was difficult to obtain, even in Recife. Now it can be had in almost every corner grocery. The Brazilians, like ourselves, are learning to take short cuts, often substituting an inferior manufactured product for the traditional "home made", because it is less trouble.